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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MELBOURNE 000023

SENSITIVE

Department for CA/OCS/ACS/EAP, White House for NSC Bader

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: FIRES CONTINUE AS 60 U.S. FIRE EXPERTS PREPARE FOR
AUSTRALIAN DEPLOYMENT

Ref: A) Melbourne 21, B) Melbourne 20, C) Melbourne 17, D) Canberra
134, E) Canberra 100

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Summary

1. (SBU) The impact of Australia's deadliest natural disaster continues to be felt as the death toll from Saturday's inferno climbs to 181 with more victims expected to be discovered. Twenty-three major fires remain burning, but no new deaths have been reported. The Victorian government has requested the assistance of 60 U.S. wildfire experts who are expected to be on the ground in Melbourne on February 15; we expect considerable media interest. Australian media continued to highlight the President's expression of condolences and offer of support. Post has not received any report of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the blazes and continues to liaise with local authorities to confirm the welfare and whereabouts of two American citizens. While it is still too early to assess the full damage of the fires, some are already expressing concern that burned water catchment areas may further complicate Melbourne's already tight water supply. End Summary.

U.S. Assistance

2. (SBU) Bodie Shaw, Deputy Director of the NIFC (National Interagency Fire Center, Bureau of Indian Affairs) and the primary U.S. link with the government of Victoria, confirmed on February 11 that Victorian authorities had formally requested 60 U.S. wildfire personnel to assist in management and recovery operations. The current deployment plan will have these experts arrive in Melbourne on February 15. The team will consist of 35 specialist fire experts to supplement Australian fire suppression efforts as well as 26 burned area emergency response technicians. There is already some concern that the fires have substantially damaged the critical Yarra water catchment which may compound Melbourne's dramatic water shortages. Post expects that there will be widespread media interest in the U.S. team.

23 Fires Continue to Burn

3. (SBU) At least 23 fires continue to burn throughout Victoria as the official number of dead reached 181 on February 11. Victoria Premier John Brumby noted on February 11 that there is still a significant number of missing persons which could push the death toll from Saturday's fire storm well over 200. Paul Davis, an Australian Emergency Management official informed post on February

11 that only 13 of the 23 fires are "contained." According to a state fire situation report released at 7:00 AM local time on February 11, nine fire complexes are burning or have burned through 449,918 hectares of land (equivalent to about 1.1 million acres). Property losses include 1,033 private dwellings, 78 state and community infrastructure buildings and 197,770 hectares (488,700 acres) of agricultural properties/public land. Over 7,000 Australians have been evacuated from their homes, many of which are still under fire threat.

Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Western Australia have deployed over 4,250 people to fight the blazes.

American Citizens

14. (SBU) As of 4:30 PM local time, post had not received any reports of U.S. citizens injured or killed in the fires. We verified the well-being of one of the two welfare and whereabouts (W&W) requests received on February 10 and two of the three W&W requests received on February 11. Post continues to follow up with local authorities and is reaching out to American clubs in order to verify the well-being of our two outstanding W&W cases.

Australian Government Response

15. (SBU) The Australian federal government has responded by increasing the Victorian direct assistance fund from A\$10 million (US\$6.7 million) to A\$15 million (US\$10 million) on February 10. Private donations to relief funds have reached at least A\$34 million (US\$22.8 million). Parliamentary question time was suspended on February 10 and 11 so PM Rudd could move a condolence motion on the brush fires; he conveyed President Obama's sympathies. Rudd said

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state governments would be able to draw on the economic stimulus package to assist victims and rebuild communities. He assured opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull that bushfire spending would not depend on the stimulus package passing in parliament. According to Rudd, there will be no cap on the Federal contribution to the recovery effort.

Comment

16. (SBU) Both the Australian government and the private sector have stepped up financial assistance to the victims of the brush fire crisis as blazes continue in several parts of Victoria. Melbourne's daily newspapers are filled with personal stories of loss which is indicative of the shock still being felt by many Australians. While it is still too early to fully assess the damage of these fires, U.S. technical assistance, particularly on Melbourne's damaged water catchment areas, will likely be warmly welcomed.

THURSTON